

## **Standard: Visitation between Parents, Siblings, Relatives, and Children in Out-of-Home Care**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of these standards is to provide direction and guidance to the Children and Family Services (CFS) programs regarding visitation between parents, siblings, relatives, and children in out-of-home care. These standards are intended to achieve statewide consistency in the development and application of CFS core services and shall be implemented in the context of all applicable laws, rules, and policies. These standards will also provide a measurement for program accountability.

### **Introduction**

The primary purposes of visitation have been identified as maintaining parent-child and other family relationships and reducing the sense of abandonment that children experience at placement. Frequent visitation has consistently been found not only to benefit children emotionally, but also to contribute to the achievement of their permanency goal.

### **Definitions:**

**Visitation:** planned, face-to-face contact between a child in out-of-home care and his or her family, apart from family counseling. Visitation is the primary mechanism through which family relationships are maintained while a child is in out-of-home care. It provides the context for learning, if and when a parent is willing and capable of providing a safe environment for their child or if a permanent plan other than reunification is to be considered. Visitation may include parents, grandparents, relatives, siblings, and other individuals with whom the child has previously established a significant relationship. The benefits of planned visitation are as follows:

- Visitation can ease the family's pain of separation and loss;
- Visitation allows the parents or caregivers to stay current with the child's development and activities;
- Regular visitation has been shown to increase the likelihood of reunification and reduce the time in out-of-home care;
- Visitation helps children avoid self-blame for the placement and reassures the child that his/her parents/caregivers still want him or her;
- Visitation can be a powerful factor in case decision-making; and
- Visitation can assist with the transition of reunification and reduce the likelihood of disruption after reunification has occurred.

**Monitored Visitation:** family visitation that occurs without a visitation supervisor being present during the entire visit. During monitored visitation, the supervisor is available and checks with the family from time to time, but does not attend the family visit.

**Supervised Visitation:** family visitation that occurs with a designated supervisor present during the entire visit to ensure the safety of the child. The individual assigned to supervise the visit assures that rules and conditions of the visit are adhered to by the family and child (e.g. specific behaviors or activities that should or must not occur).

## **Standards**

### **Frequency of Visitation between Parents and Children:**

It is a fundamental right for children to visit with their parents unless it is unsafe to have contact. Unless safety, distance, court orders or service plans indicate it is not feasible or in the best interest of the child, visitation between parents and children should be offered weekly, at a minimum. Reasons for not offering or facilitating weekly visitation must be documented. The frequency of visitation will incorporate the individual needs of each child. Safety, age of the child, developmental needs, and bonding are some considerations in determining frequency of visitation. At all times, the physical and emotional safety of the child should be ensured during visits by developing a plan which provides a higher level of supervision initially with decreasing supervision as indicated.

### **Frequency of Visitation between Siblings:**

Whenever possible, siblings should be placed in the same alternate care setting. If siblings must be separated, family ties should be maintained through visitation between siblings. At a minimum, face-to-face visitation between siblings, who are in alternate care and were in the same household when the child was removed, should occur monthly. Additional contact between siblings placed in different homes or facilities may include telephone calls, e-mail, and letters. Connections may also be aided by placement of siblings in foster homes within the same school district. Reasons for exceptions to monthly visitation or contact between siblings must be documented.

### **Location and Time of Visits:**

Visits should take place at a location that will allow for positive and uninterrupted interaction between parents and their child. It is optimal for visitation to occur in a home-like setting, i.e., the parental home, the home of a relative, or the resource family home. Office visits are acceptable if structure is necessary to evaluate or protect the child. In selecting the location, the following factors should be considered:

- Suitability for developmentally related activities; (e.g. the location should allow for positive interaction conducive to the child's developmental level);
- Parent's attitudes and feelings about the child's resource family and their ability to handle contact with one another;
- The resource family's interest, willingness, and capacity to be involved in parent-child contacts as well as their feelings and attitudes towards the child's legal parents; and
- Consideration for the child's physical safety and emotional stability.

Visitation should be scheduled at times and locations that are convenient for the family, the child, and other involved parties, including those who are responsible for supervising

or monitoring the visit. In developing the child/family visitation plan, consideration shall be given to the child's school schedule and parent's work and other obligations.

### **Development of Visitation Plans:**

The social worker should prepare a written visitation schedule with the child (when age appropriate), the child's parents, and the child's resource family as part of the alternate care plan and service plan. The child's visitation plan defines the structure of visiting, logistics, task assignments, and the roles and responsibilities of family members, agency staff, and the resource family.

The plan will address but is not limited to issues including:

- Dates, time, length, and locations of visits;
- How arrangements for visitation will be made;
- Who will be present at visits;
- Arrangement for monitoring or supervising visits, if any;
- Transportation arrangements, if needed;
- Visitation rules or conditions (e.g. specific behaviors or activities that must or must not occur);
- Plans for handling emergency or conflictual situations; and
- Procedures for handling disagreements or problems with visitation.

A written visitation plan reassures children and their families that CFS is invested in protecting the family relationship. As the child's and the family's situations change, the visitation plan must be revised.

### **Scheduling Visitation:**

The social worker should inform the child's parent of their responsibility to call as far in advance as possible if visits must be canceled. With adequate notice, a child is less likely to feel rejection and disappointment that could result from the parents not keeping the visitation appointment. The social worker should also encourage and assist parents in assuming the parental role during visits with their child.

### **Resource Family Responsibilities Regarding Visitation:**

Resource parents are expected to accept and encourage planned contacts between the child and their parents and siblings and provide the child with emotional support even when the contacts with his/her parents and siblings are disrupting or confusing to the child. The resource parents are expected to:

- Support the child's contact with his or her parents and siblings;
- Have the child dressed and ready for visits;
- Have clothing, etc. packed for overnight visits;
- Provide transportation to and from the visit or a place to visit when agreed to in the visitation plan;
- Help the child accept each separation from their parent following visits;
- Report the child's reactions after visits with their family to the case manager; and

- Notify the child's case manager of any unplanned contacts between the child and their parent, or between the foster parent and the child's parent.

### **Documentation of Visitation:**

The visitation plan should be documented on the alternate care plan and/or service plan. Each visit is documented on the contact/visitation screens in FOCUS once those screens have been implemented. Until those screens are operational, visits should be documented on the presenting issue narrative prior to development of the service plan. After the service plan is developed, each visit should be recorded on the service plan narrative. The narrative should include the date of the visit, those in attendance, the duration of the visit, the location of the visit, and the activities and interactions that occurred during the visit. Documentation should include a description of the parents' and child's behaviors and avoid making judgments or conclusions.

### **Use of Visitation to Reward or Punish the Child or Family:**

Parents and children have a right to visit each other unless face to face contact could pose a safety risk to the child. Visits between a child and their parents should not be cancelled or restricted for other reasons. For example, if a parent had a positive urinalysis for drugs during the previous week, but there is no reason to believe the parent is under the influence of drugs at the time of a scheduled visit, visitation should take place as scheduled. However, if a parent arrives for a visit and appears to be under the influence of drugs, visitation should be rescheduled. Urinalysis should not be mandated prior to every visit. The social worker or substance abuse contractor will assess the parent's condition and use their judgment in determining when a urinalysis is necessary. Withholding visits shall never be used as a threat or form of punishment of the child of the child's parents. Changes in visitation arrangements or schedules must be directly related to the safety of the child and the case plan.

### **Visitation Activities:**

Every visit between a child and their parents' should have a purpose and be meaningful. Consider the following questions in scheduling visitation:

- How could visits reinforce cultural identity? For example, can the visit allow the child to attend an event related to his or her culture, such as a religious service or cultural-oriented festival?
- How can visits provide ways for parents or caregivers to attend to the child's developmental tasks?
- How can visits facilitate parents' involvement in their child's daily care and special events?
- How can visits be structured to provide a forum for parents or caregivers to demonstrate increasing competence as caregivers or their progress toward service plan objectives?
- In what ways should visitation activities change to reflect the family's progress or needs?
- What do the child's and the parents' or caregiver's reactions to visits indicate about the family's potential for reunification?

- What aspects of the visits should be documented to develop and support case recommendations?

### **When to Supervise or Monitor Visitation:**

Safety of the child and the reason the family came to the attention of Children and Family Services will determine whether visitation will be supervised, unsupervised, or monitored. In all cases, the first visit should be supervised, to give the social worker the opportunity to continue to assess the parent/child interaction and become better acquainted with the family.

Initially, supervised visitation is often required to ensure the safety of the child. As the family progresses and works to reduce the level of risk in the home, visitation may be monitored (the CFS worker or designee is not present the entire visit) and gradually, unsupervised visitation may be introduced.

The continuum of successful visitation is as follows:

supervised visitation → monitored visitation → unsupervised/unmonitored visitation lasting a couple hours → unsupervised/unmonitored overnight visitation → unsupervised/unmonitored weekend visitation → extended unsupervised/unmonitored visitation.

CASA and the court must be informed of the plan to reduce the level of supervision during family visitation in accordance with local practice expectations.

### **Supervising a Visit:**

Visitation may be supervised by the family's social worker, a relative, a friend of the family, a volunteer, a contractor or other persons designated by Children and Family Services. The decision of who will supervise a visit will be made on a case by case basis depending on the individual's ability to protect the child and assist the family with their visitation.

The visitation supervisor should not monopolize the family visit by discussing the family's progress on the service plan, talking with the parents, or playing with the child unless the visit is planned to be an interactive teaching/modeling session.

### **Visiting in Specific Situations:**

#### **When a Parent is Incarcerated:**

When feasible and appropriate, parent/child visitation should continue if a parent is incarcerated. The length and frequency of visitation will depend on the age of the child, the proximity of the jail or prison and the limitations the jail or prison has regarding visitation. For example, an infant or toddler may not benefit from a visit with a parent when they are separated by a glass wall and where communication is by telephone.

**When a Parent is in an Institution or treatment facility:**

Whenever possible and safe, the social worker should support continued visitation, contact, and correspondence between the child and their parents when the parents are in an institution or treatment facility. If proximity permits and the safety of the child can be assured, the social worker should work with the institution or facility to arrange a visitation schedule.

**Domestic Violence:**

In cases involving domestic violence, the social worker must consider court orders and the child's need and desire to see their parents when planning visits or other contact. Parents from homes where domestic violence occurred must not visit the child together until such a time as an intervention and treatment specialists determines such visits pose no threat to any member of the family. Safeguards for visits must meet the safety needs of the child as well as the safety needs of the non-offending parent. When indicated, measures shall include, but are not limited to, arranging different visiting schedules, a safe drop-off/pick-up location, and a safety plan in case the batterer unexpectedly appears.

**Sexual Abuse:**

In sexual abuse cases, visits between the abuser and a child should not be scheduled until the therapist for the child recommends that visits take place, the case manager assesses that contact is in the best interest of the child, and visits are approved by the court. It is preferable for the child's therapist to be present for these visits as part of the healing process. If a therapist is not available to be present during visits, another person with whom the child has a supportive relationship should be present with the child.

**Termination of Parental Rights:**

Children shall have visits scheduled with their parents, siblings, and other family members until a judge has ruled that parental rights have been terminated. In some cases, contact and visitation may continue after parental rights have been terminated if it is in the best interest of the child. For example, an older child in long term foster care may desire a relationship with their parent. Likewise, even after parental rights have been terminated, a child may benefit from the connection he/she has with their extended family or siblings.

**Relevant Rules Governing Family and Children's Services and FACS Standards**

IDAPA 16.06.01.050.06 -- Visitation with Legal Parents

IDAPA 16.06.01.405.05 -- Contact with Child

422.02.b.i. -- Development of the Alternate Care Plan

Standard on Contact between the social worker, the child, the Family, and Resource Parent(s) or other Alternate Care Providers

**Any variance to these standards shall be documented and approved by the Division Administrator, unless otherwise noted.**

